



## “Tales of Mystery and Imagination”



**Examples of ambiguities and misunderstandings in English-language technical documentation and tips on how to avoid them.**



James Ghirlando, Jürgen Mührs  
cognitas GmbH, Ottobrunn

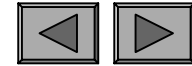
[www.cognitas.de](http://www.cognitas.de)  
[james.ghirlando@cognitas.de](mailto:james.ghirlando@cognitas.de),  
[juergen.muehrs@cognitas.de](mailto:juergen.muehrs@cognitas.de)

Tekom-H05 WS9

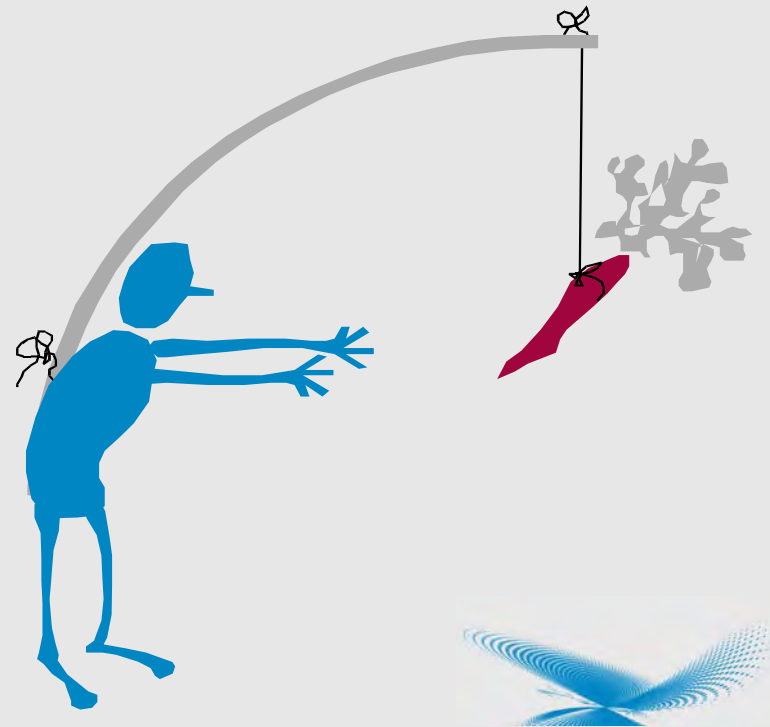




## Motivation

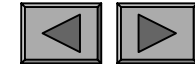


- Globalized markets
- Joint-venture projects
- Medium of communication
- Costs, contracts, efficiency, time constraints
- Global audience
- Target group





## What to expect



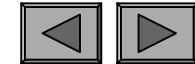
We will present:

- Common mistakes, typical traps:  
point of view of native German speaker  
& native English speaker
- Theoretical introduction,  
accompanied by practical exercises
- Guide to guaranteeing the quality of  
documentation
- "Toolbox" for self-education  
and every-day usage

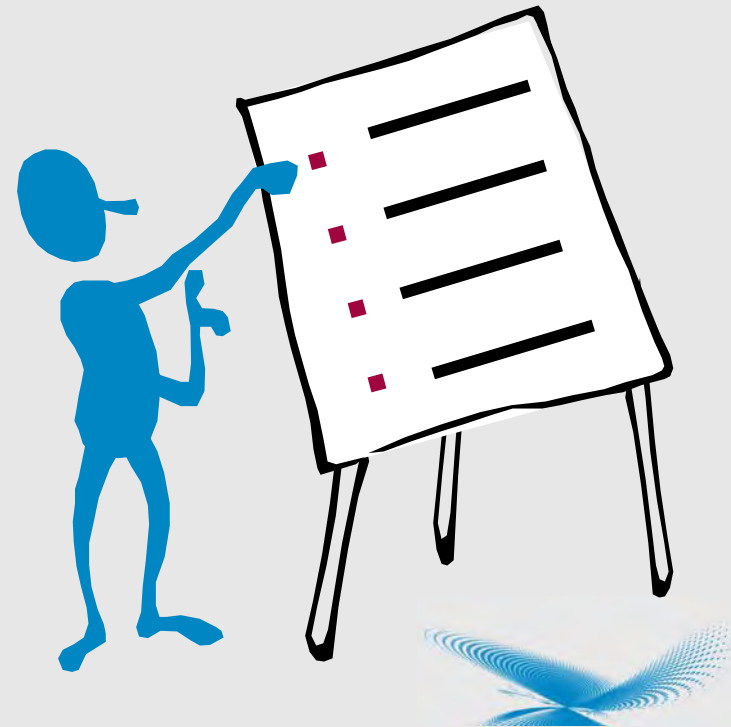




## How shall we proceed?

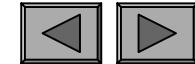


- Language issues (with exercises)
  - Grammar
  - Vocabulary
- Writing style (with exercise)
  - Correct use of verbs
  - Tone
  - Cultural issues
- Basics for user-friendly writing
- General tips and guidelines
- Useful links on Internet
- Discussion

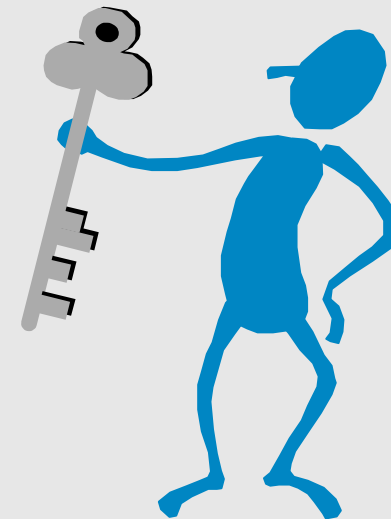




## Grammar - overview

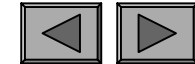


- Punctuation: commas
- Punctuation: lists
- Compound words
- Acronyms
- Prepositions
- Particular cases of plural forms
- Gerund or infinitive?





## Punctuation: commas

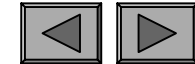


- Comma + conjunction connects 2 independent clauses:
  - You can try to turn on the machine, **but** it will not work.
- Enclosing a phrase between commas replaces parentheses:
  - The pen, **with which I was writing**, broke.  
is a more flowing way of saying:
    - The pen (**with which I was writing**) broke.
- *Never* use comma when the phrase is *replacing* an object
  - He told me ~~X~~ that he would come later.
- Do not overuse commas, a conjunction may be enough !!
  - He tugged at the rod, and it came away in his hands.  
(*comma is unnecessary*)





## Punctuation: lists

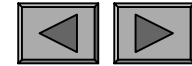


- Elements in a list separated by *commas*:
  - I bought apples, oranges and pears.  
Use a comma before *and* to deliberately separate the last item:
    - I bought apples, a ham and cheese sandwich, **and** a bone for the dog.
- For complex and lengthy lists use colon & semicolons:
  - I bought several items: a kilo of red, ripe apples; a sandwich filled with ham and melted cheese; and a bone, for the dog to chew on.





## Compound words (I)



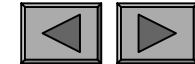
- Closed compounds should *only* be used if they exist in an authoritative dictionary (e.g. Webster)
  - Examples: [download](#), [keyboard](#), [database](#), [backup](#)
- General rule is not to hyphenate compound nouns
  - Examples: [web page](#), [mouse click](#)
- Verbs and nouns with prefixes are generally not hyphenated and written in one word.
  - Typical candidates are co-, de-, pre-, post-, pro-, re- und non-.  
Examples: [restart](#), [deactivate](#)
- Compound adjectives are generally hyphenated
  - [Decision-making process](#), *but* [process of decision making](#)
  - [High-speed disk](#), *but* [disk](#) running at [high speed](#)







## Compound words (II)

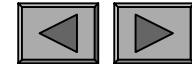


- Series of compounds:
  - Start and stop bit
  - Download and upload, not down- and upload
  - Full- and part-time employees
- However, it is better to write:
  - Start bit and stop bit
  - Full-time and part-time employees
- Verbs:
  - Back up, backed up
  - Log in, logging in
  - downloaded





## Acronyms

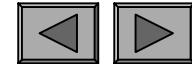


- The indefinite article applied to an acronym depends on whether the **spoken** acronym starts with a vowel or not:
  - **an** RNC vs. **a** BTS; **a** UMTS phone vs. **a** GSM phone
  - *but a* MUX (spoken as *multiplexer*)
- Plural form is created by adding an "s" (no apostrophe!):
  - one NMC, several NMCs
  - two HSBC branchesExceptions: several BSS's *or* several BSSs
- The possessive form is created by adding
  - an apostrophe +s for the singular: the **NMC's** configuration file
  - an apostrophe for the plural: the **NMCs'** configuration filesBetter to write: the configuration files **of the NMCs.**





## Prepositions

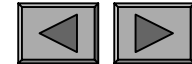


- Comparison
  - A's length is **identical to** B's: A is **as long as** B but **shorter than** C.
- For / since
  - **for** when measuring time: I have been working **for** 4 years
  - **since** with specific date / time: I have been working **since** 2001
- Prepositions are often used idiomatically
- Commonly used preposition / verb combinations:
  - Capacity **depends on** size but is **independent of** power
  - The processor is **capable of** handling heavy loads
  - A blinking icon **corresponds to** an element
  - **Compare A to** B to realize that they are indeed different
  - **Compare** the heart **with** a large pumping machine





## Plural forms

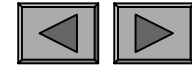


- Particular cases:
  - The word **functionalities** does not exist!  
Use **functionality** / **functions** instead.
  - **Data** is already plural, but can be used in singular or plural constructions. **Datum** would be the singular form.
  - The word **informations** does not exist!  
(Neither does **an information**)  
Use **pieces of information** to form the plural.
  - The word **media** is already plural.  
**Medium** is the singular form.





## Gerund or Infinitive?

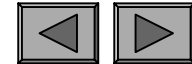


- *Gerund* = verb acting as a noun, e.g. the **running** is about to begin
- Problem for non-native speakers: when to use gerund or not. E.g.:
  - *Recommend* is followed by a *gerund* or an *object*  
I recommend **that you leave** / I recommend **leaving**  
*not* I recommend **to leave**
  - *Allow* is followed by an *object* + *infinitive* or by *for* + *noun*  
this allows **you to filter** / this allows **for the filtering**  
*not* this allows **the filtering**
- *Begin* can be followed by a *gerund* or an *infinitive*  
It began **raining**  
It began **to rain**





## Vocabulary - overview

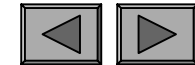


- False friends
- Typical cases of doubt
- Misused words
- American or British English





## Vocabulary - definitions

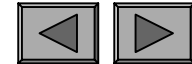


- *False friends*: a German < > English word pair, where the two words sound similar but differ in meaning (e.g. **actual** < > "aktuell")
- *Typical case of doubt*: when a German word can have more than one translation in English (e.g. "kontrollieren" < > 1. **control** or 2. **check**)
- *Misused words*: two or more English words which are often confused by Germans (e.g. **if** vs. **when**)





## Examples



- **False Friends**

“effektiv”, “kontrollieren”, “konsequent”, “regulär”, “aktuell”, “relevant”  
“eventuell”, “sensibel”, “wobei”, “vorgesehen”

- **Typical cases of doubt**

“beenden”, “vergrößern”, “realisieren”, “schon”

- **Misused words**

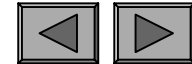
which vs. that, if vs. when, like vs. such as, save vs. store,  
distinguish vs. differ, comprise vs. consist of vs. constitute,  
break vs. interval vs. pause, respectively, only, cannot vs. can not  
make, one







## False friends (I)



- **“effektiv”**

- **effective** means *practical* (“wirksam, tatsächlich”)
- use **efficient** to mean “wirtschaftlich, rationell”

Example:

*With an **efficient** algorithm, the **effective** performance is only 10 percent lower than the theoretical peak performance.*

- **“kontrollieren”**

- **control** means *regulate* (“steuern, regeln”)
- use **check** to mean “überprüfen, nachschauen”

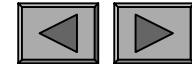
Example:

*The operator **controls** traffic on the network and **checks** whether the the number of users exceeds the capacity or not.*





## False friends (II)



- **“konsequent”**

- **consequent** means *as a result of* (“daraus folgend”)
- use **consistent** to mean “vollständig, durchgängig”

Example:

*Consistent modularization optimizes the creation process of technical documentation. The consequent implementation of database publishing systems requires technical authors to rethink their way of writing.*

- **“regulär”**

- **regular** means 1. recurring 2. following fixed rules (“regelmäßig”)
- use **normal** / **standard** / **ordinary** to mean “normal” in UK  
use **regular** only in US

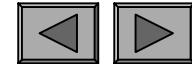
Example:

*Cars require regular maintenance.  
The standard maintenance interval is once a year.*





## False friends (III)



- **“aktuell”**

- translated to **actual** is wrong in 90% of cases - avoid!!
- **actual** means *real* (“tatsächlich, eigentlich”)
- use **up-to-date** or **current** to mean “gegenwärtig”

Example:

*The **actual** SW upgrade does not only comprise bug fixes, but also an **up-to-date** SW version with new functionality.*

- **“relevant”**

- **relevant** means *important, significant* (“wichtig, bedeutend”)
- use **corresponding** to mean “zugehörig”

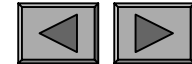
Example:

*All **relevant** information for sales activities is contained in the database. The **corresponding** records can be retrieved via SQL queries.*





## False friends (IV)



- **“eventuell”**

- **eventually** means *after some time* (“schließlich, am Ende”)
- use **possible** to mean “eventuell”

Example:

*Eventually, the server started up again very quickly.*

*It is possible that the administrator just had to carry out a reset.*

- **“sensibel”**

- **sensible** means *reasonable* (“vernünftig”)
- use **sensitive** to mean “heikel, sensibel”

Example:

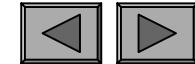
*A database may contain sensitive information.*

*Taking protection measures is a sensible idea.*





## False friends (V)



- **“wobei”**
  - **whereby** is a formal word meaning “womit”, “wodurch” (not recommended)
  - there is no direct equivalent in English, its translation depends on the context

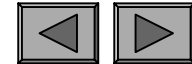
Example:

*The program saves the image, allowing (= “wobei”) you to select the desired quality. The algorithm whereby (= “wodurch”) image data is compressed is a very efficient one. You can select a compression ratio from the menu, but at the same time (= “wobei”) you should avoid degrading image quality.*





## False friends (VI)



- **“vorgesehen”**
  - **foreseen** means *known about beforehand* (“vorausgesehen”)
  - use **intended** or **provided for** to mean “vorgesehen”

Example:

*This machine **is not intended for** use in sub-zero temperatures.*

*Use of this machine in sub-zero temperatures **is not provided for**.*

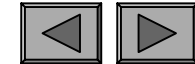
Example for use of **foreseen**:

*The cost explosion in the implementation phase could not be **foreseen**.*





## Typical cases of doubt (I)



- “beenden”

- has ambiguous meanings in german
- can be translated in different ways

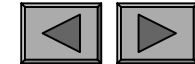
Examples:

- to **finish** a program means *to complete it* (“fertigstellen”)
- to **stop** a process (“anhalten”) does **not** specify whether:
  - the process was completed
  - the process can be continued
- to **abort**, to **cancel** means *to stop prematurely without completion* (“abbrechen, stornieren”)
- to **terminate** means that *s.th. cannot be continued; it may be complete* (“abschließen”)





## Typical cases of doubt (II)



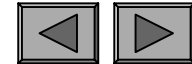
- **“vergrößern”**
  - you **enlarge** a picture (*spacial areas, also in a transferred sense*)
  - you **increase** a value (*countable values*)
  - you **extend** / **expand** a range (*abstract items*)
  - you **magnify** with a microscope (*optical items*)
  
- **“realisieren”**
  - you **realize** a dream (*something desirable*)
  - you **implement** a system (*bring into existence*)
  - you **realize** a system with 99% reliability (*99% reliability desirable*)
  - you **carry out** a project or process (*something ongoing*)
  
- **“schon”**
  - 6 machines have **already** been installed.
  - **Just** 3 processes are enough to stall the operating system.







## Misused words (I)



- **which vs. that**

- use **which** to provide additional information about s.th.
- use **that** to identify s.th.

Example:

*The file, **which** stores all names, was deleted.*

*The file **that** stores all names was deleted. (that particular one)*

- **if vs. when**

- **if** means *in the event that* ("falls")
- **when** means *at what time* ("dann, wenn")

Example:

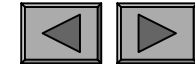
***If** the machine starts up, then it works.*

***When** the machine starts, enter password.*





## Misused words (II)



- **like vs. such as**

- **like** means *similar to* ("ähnlich wie, vergleichbar mit")
- **such as** means *for example* ("wie zum Beispiel")

Example:

*Typesetting programs **like** Framemaker allow WYSIWYG editing of documents.*

*WYSIWYG editors, **such as** Framemaker, show the actual layout of documents while editing it.*

- **save vs. store**

- **save** means *to put aside* ("abspeichern, zur Seite legen")
- **store** means *to place or leave in a location* ("aufbewahren") –

Example:

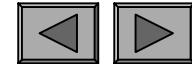
*The program **saves** data **to** file A.*

*Data is **stored in** file A.*





## Misused words (III)



- **distinguish vs. differ**

- **distinguish** means to give prominence ("sich auszeichnen")
- **differ** means to be unlike ("sich unterscheiden")

Example:

*Better performance **distinguishes** computer A from computer B.  
Computer A **differs** from computer B in its performance.*

- **comprise vs. consist of vs. constitute**

- **comprise** means *to include* ("umfassen")
- **consist of** means *to be composed or made up* ("bestehen aus")
- **constitute** means *to be all the substance of* ("darstellen, sein")

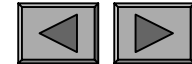
Example:

*The system **comprises** a database and a web server,  
besides the GUI.  
The system **consists of** database, GUI, and web server.  
Database, GUI and web server **constitute** the system.*





## Misused words (IV)



- **break vs. interval vs. pause**

- use **break** for a temporary interrupt, e.g. of an activity
- use **interval** for a fixed interrupt, e.g. of an event
- use **pause** for a short stop of an ongoing action (*assumes resumption*)

Example:

*The program must be shut down at regular **intervals**.  
After a short **pause** should operation automatically continue.  
If not, the administrator should take a **break** first.*

- **respectively**

- *not* a direct translation of "**bzw**"
- means *in the given order* and requires exact sentence structure

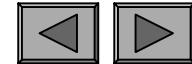
Example:

*Variables **A** and **B** take on values **1** and **2**, **respectively**.*





## Misused words (V)



- **only**
  - modifies the immediate following part of the sentence
  - defines the word right behind it

Example:

This computer sends the data **only** over Ethernet.

This computer **only** sends the data over Ethernet.

**Only** this computer sends the data over Ethernet.

This computer sends **only** data over Ethernet.

- **cannot vs. can not**
  - cannot means *to be unable to do*
  - can not could mean something else

Example:

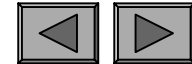
You **cannot** take the lid off, it is bolted.

You **can not** take the lid off if you like,  
but you would not be able to open the box.





## Misused words (VI)



- **make**

- is not a translation of the German “machen”
- *do* implies continuity
- *make* implies creation

Example:

You *do* your job, but you *make* a cake.

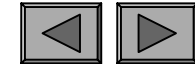
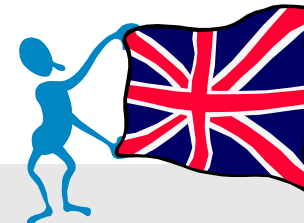
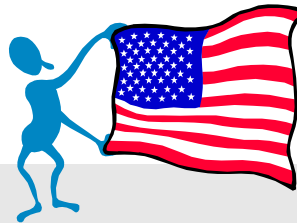
- **one**

- does not necessarily mean the German “man”
- use *you* / *he* or *she*





## American or British English



### Vocabulary:

*computer program*  
*program (TV, activity)*  
*gray*  
*regular*

*computer program*  
*programme*  
*grey*  
*standard*

### Idiomatic expressions:

*check the box*  
*standing in line*

*tick the box*  
*queuing*

### Suffixes:

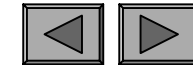
*-eled, -eling (modeled)*  
*-or (color)*  
*-og (analog)*  
*-ize (standardize)*  
*-ense (defense)*  
*-ization*  
*-er (center)*

*-elled, -elling (modelled)*  
*-our (colour)*  
*-ogue (analogue)*  
*-ize / -ise (standardise)*  
*-ence (defence)*  
*-isation / -ization*  
*-re (centre)*





## Writing style - overview



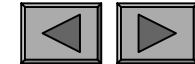
- Correct use of verbs
- Phrasal verbs
- Tone
- Cultural issues







## Writing style – correct use of verbs

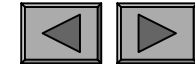


- Present tense
  - I **travel** to work **every day** = *regularity*.
  - I **am travelling** to work **at this very moment** = *continuity*
- Avoid the use of the formulation *will be*.  
This strictly implies future.
  - “Dateien werden gespeichert” = files **are saved**.  
(*not will be saved*)
- Do not use shortened verbs
  - **is not**, not **isn't**; **will not**, not **won't**





## Writing style – phrasal verbs



- Phrasal verb = verb + preposition or adverb
- Use **phrasal verbs** with native English-speaking audiences; only if confident of meaning
- For other audiences, use the **Romanic** equivalent
- Some Phrasal verbs < > Romanic equivalent

look up < > search (*in a list*)

use up < > consume

fill out < > complete

set up < > arrange

point out < > demonstrate

go on < > continue

take off < > remove

put out < > extinguish

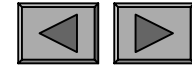
look into < > investigate

put on < > mount





## Writing style – tone



- Avoid the use of the passive; it is too impersonal.
  - *Not:* All files **should be saved** to avoid damage to your data.
  - *But:* **You should save** all files to avoid damage to your data.
- Write to *English native speakers* in softer tones:
  - To avoid damage to your data, you **should** save all files.
  - You **need to** press the power button to switch on your PC.
  - *Not:* You **must** save all files. (*Sounds like a threat!*)
- Best to address user directly:
  - Save all files to avoid damage to your data.





## Writing style - cultural issues

- Keep in mind the cultural group at which documentation is aimed!
  - Modern **English** native speakers prefer simple, direct and *informal* speech. The tone should be friendly.
  - **German** native speakers think that simple language carries an unprofessional image. Also avoid soft tones.
  - **Arabic** native speakers appreciate verbosity.
  - **Italian** native speakers view repetition as patronizing.





## Basics for writing user-friendly



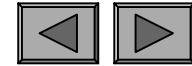
The "ask oxford" website recommends:

- Build sentences with average of 15 to 20 words.
- Use words your readers are likely to understand.
- Use only as many words as you really need.
- Choose the active voice unless there's a good reason for using the passive.
- Use the clearest, crispest, liveliest verb to express your thoughts.
- Use vertical lists to break up complicated text.
- Write positively as much as possible.
- Reduce cross-references to a minimum.
- Try to avoid sexist usage.
- Use accurate punctuation.

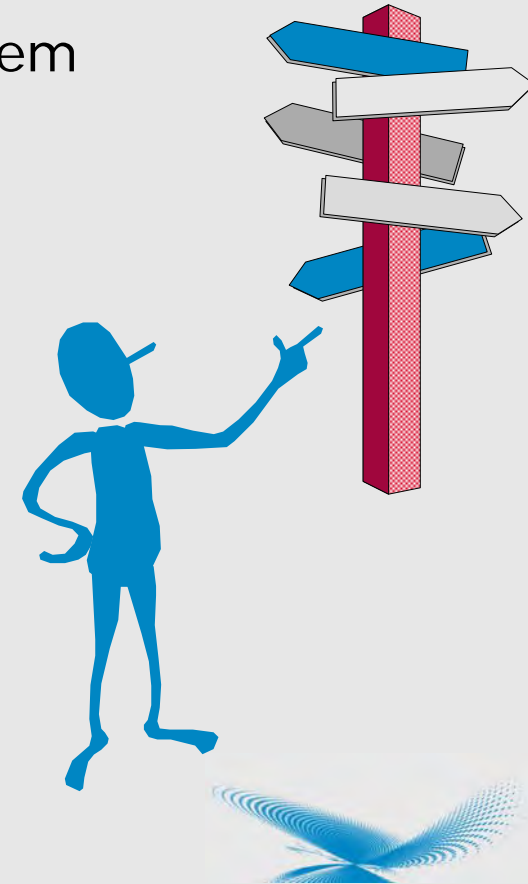




## General tips and guidelines

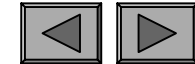


- Be aware of common mistakes and avoid them
- Improve your knowledge
- Do not trust your sources
- Use standardized phrases and terminology
- Ask native speakers
- Use a good dictionary (printed or electronic)
- Search Internet for the correct translation

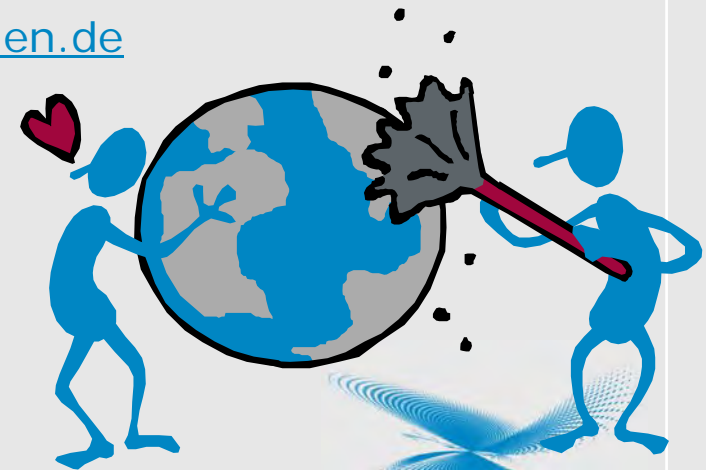




## Useful links on Internet

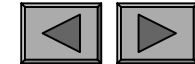


- Dictionaries:  
<http://www.webster.com/>, <http://dict.leo.org/>, <http://www.linguadict.de/>,  
<http://www.linguadict.de/>, <http://www.dictionary.com/>,  
<http://wombat.doc.ic.ac.uk/foldoc/>, <http://www.onelook.com/browse.shtml>
- Acronyms:  
<http://www.acronymfinder.de/>
- Frequently made mistakes:  
<http://www.twenzel.de/>, [www.uebersetzungsfallen.de](http://www.uebersetzungsfallen.de)
- Grammar and style resources:  
<http://www.askoxford.com/betterwriting/>,  
[webster.commnet.edu/grammar/](http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/)
- Tips for writing globally:  
<http://on-site-english.com/article.html>,  
<http://www.askoxford.com/globalenglish/>,  
<http://www.intecom.org/>





## Grammar and style resources



### ■ Guidelines

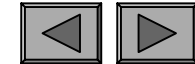
- INTECOM International Language Project Group, "Guidelines for writing English-language technical documentation for an international audience", Edition 1: June 2003
- "The SIEMENS English Stylebook", Corporate Communications, Corporate Messages, Siemens AG, April 2003
- McCaskill, "A Handbook for Technical Writers and Editors – Grammar, Punctuation, and Capitalization", NASA Langley Research Center, 1998

### ■ Books

- Huckin and Olsen, "Technical Writing and Professional Communication for Nonnative Speakers of English", McGraw Hill, 1983
- J. van Emden, J. Easteal, "Technical Writing and Speaking", Mc Graw-Hill, 1996
- Richard Humphrey, "False Friends, Falser Friends, Falsest Friends", 2003
- Dr. Sonia Brough, Carolyn Kilday Wittman, "Schluß mit typischen Englisch-Fehlern", 1991







**Thank you for your attention!  
Any questions?**

James Ghirlando, Jürgen Mührs  
cognitas GmbH, Ottobrunn

[www.cognitas.de](http://www.cognitas.de)

[james.ghirlando@cognitas.de](mailto:james.ghirlando@cognitas.de),

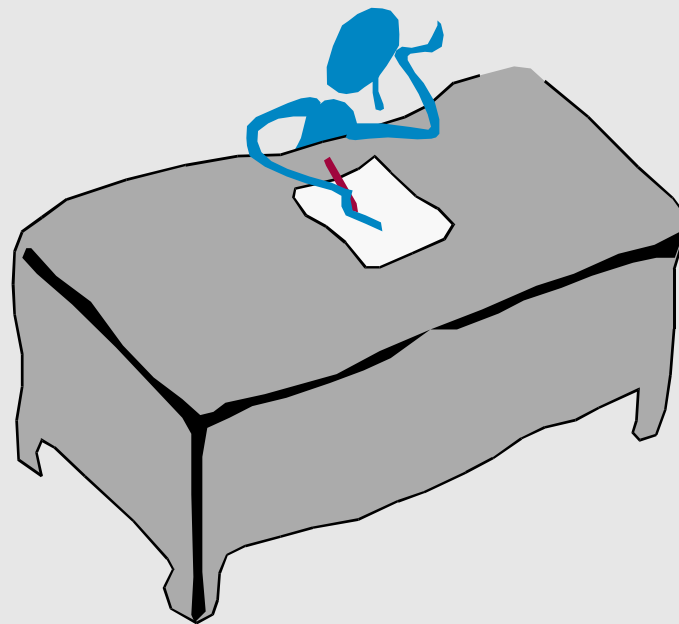
[juergen.muehrs@cognitas.de](mailto:juergen.muehrs@cognitas.de)

Tekom-H05 WS9





## Exercises





## Grammar - exercise

Spot the mistakes:

"I warned you, that I would not wait for ever. I have been standing next to a H&M store since 2 hours now, but you still have not arrived. I think, I cannot depend in you any longer. You are simply not capable in keeping appointments. Even a dogs´ IQ is higher as yours. I cannot allow this to happen again."





## Grammar - exercise

Spot the mistakes:

"I warned you, that I would not wait for ever. I have been standing next to a H&M store since 2 hours now, but you still have not arrived. I think, I cannot depend in you any longer. You are simply not capable in keeping appointments. Even a dogs' IQ is higher as yours. I cannot allow this to happen again."

8 mistakes! Did you find them all?





## Grammar - solution to exercise

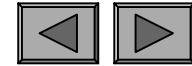
Corrected version:

“I warned you that I would not wait for ever. I have been standing next to an H&M store for 2 hours now, but you still have not arrived. I think I cannot depend on you any longer. You are simply not capable of keeping appointments. Even a dog´s IQ is higher than yours. I cannot allow this to happen again.”





## Vocabulary - exercise

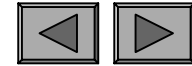


- Which sentences are correct?
  - You can shut down Windows via the start button respectively by pressing ctrl-alt-delete.
  - When you like, you can run Windows using a dumb terminal.
  - This is however not foreseen in the standard configuration.
  - Is the file actual or does it carry yesterday´s date?
  - Sensible files must be protected against loss.
  - A simple and effective solution is to perform regular backups.
  - The backup procedure saves a copy of each file to a second disk.
  - Regular backups result in an enlargement in system reliability.
  - The eventual loss of data through fire is not accounted for.
  - It is therefore vital to control all fire extinguishers regularly.





## Vocabulary - solution to exercise

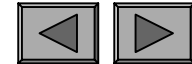


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  - Is the file actual or does it carry yesterday´s date?
  - Sensible files must be protected against loss.
  - ⊙ A simple and effective solution is to perform regular backups.
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## Vocabulary - solution (II)



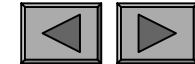
- And these are the correct(ed) sentences from the exercise!
  - You can shut down Windows via the start button or **by** pressing ctrl-alt-delete.
  - **If** you like, you can run Windows using a dumb terminal.
  - This is however not **provided for** in the standard configuration.
  - Is the file **up-to-date** or does it carry yesterday´s date?
  - **Sensitive** files must be protected against loss.
  - ▶ ■ A simple and **effective** solution is to perform **regular** backups.
  - ▶ ■ The backup procedure **saves** a copy of each file to a second disk.
  - Regular backups result in an **increase** in system reliability.
  - The **possible** loss of data through fire is not accounted for.
  - It is therefore vital to **check** all fire extinguishers regularly.







## Writing style - exercise (I)

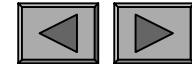


- Select the correct synoymys:
  - The program queries the database for personal details.
    - a. The program looks up personal details in the database.
    - b. The program looks into personal details in the databse.
  - The standard opening hours for the canteen are 13h-15h.
    - a. The canteen is opening at 13h.
    - b. The canteen opens at 13h.
  - The shutdown process and the display of a blue screen occur simultaneously.
    - a. Shutdown starts and a blue screen will be displayed.
    - b. Shutdown starts and a blue screen is displayed.





## Writing style - exercise (II)

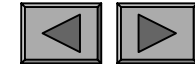


- Select the correct synoymys:
  - This model burns up a lot of fuel.
    - a. This model uses up a lot of fuel.
    - b. A lot of fuel is put out by this model.
  - Mr. Brown will have arrived in Munich by tomorrow afternoon.
    - a. Mr. Brown comes very soon to Munich.
    - b. Mr. Brown is coming very soon to Munich.
  - I will ask his secretary for an appointment with him.
    - a. I will set up a meeting with him.
    - b. I will put on a meeting with him.
    - c. His secretary is hot.





## Writing style - solution to exercise (I)

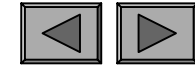


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